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Exclusive Reports

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Mineta gains power and influence at critical time

Timothy Roberts

Little did President George W. Bush know that the Democrat he put in his cabinet to signal his bipartisan intentions would become one of the most prominent characters in his administration.

But for the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, Norman Mineta, former San Jose city councilman, San Jose mayor, congressman and commerce secretary and current transportation secretary, might have become the bipartisan dressing on the Republican administration, the cabinet secretary who gets left behind for security reasons.

Now Mr. Mineta, who turns 70 on Nov. 12, is at the pinnacle of power and influence at a turning point in the nation's history.

"It's a tough job at a very tough time," says Leon Panetta, a former congressional colleague of Mr. Mineta's, before joining the Clinton White House as chief of staff. "Up to now, at least, he's done well."

But Mr. Mineta, who would not comment for this story, is beginning to show signs of frustration.

On Sept. 28, he announced that Reagan National Airport would definitely reopen, but the White House quickly contradicted him, saying the administration was still worried that the airport's proximity to important government buildings in downtown Washington, D.C., posed a safety hazard.

The White House came around to Mr. Mineta's point of view Oct. 2, and many observers say the premature announcement was an effort to force the reopening, which Mr. Mineta saw as essential in getting the country to fly again.

On Nov. 5, he lambasted the airlines for their continued lapses of security. In a speech in Chicago, the home of UAL Corp., the owner of United Airlines, he lashed out at the carriers and at United in particular for allowing a man carrying knives to pass through the security checkpoint at O'Hare International Airport.

"These failures are evidence to me that the airlines are still not making the necessary investment in security," he said, according to the text of his speech. "Imagine if pilots got lost and engines wouldn't start. The airlines would take immediate action. I want them to commit the same resources and place the same importance on the security of their

Mr. Mineta called for enforcement action against the airline, including the possibility of a substantial fine.

It is either testimony to his reputation or fear of his power that the airlines are responding gingerly to Mr. Mineta's complaints.

United issued a statement after Mr. Mineta's remarks, saying, "United welcomes Secretary Mineta's involvement in this matter and will work cooperatively, fully, and completely with the U.S. Department of Transportation as it proceeds to investigate this matter." A spokesman says the airline will not have anything further to say on the matter.

"We agree with any kind of action that will make air travel safer," says Southwest Airlines spokeswoman Brandy King.

"We are as concerned about safety as anyone," says Sonja Whitemon, a spokeswoman for American Airlines in Fort Worth, Texas. The airline did not want to comment on Mr. Mineta's handling of the crisis.

He is more widely known as a consensus builder than an enforcer, a trait that may not serve him as well in his current role. And there was no consensus in Congress over airline security as evidenced by the much different bills passed by the House and the Senate.

"He keeps his head down when the partisan fighting starts," says Bruce Cain, director of the Institute for Governmental Studies at the University of California at Berkeley.

"If the Democrats and Republicans stay very far apart on the federalizing of the airline security workers, it clearly puts him in a tricky position."

U.S. Rep. Richard Gephardt, the Missouri Democrat who serves as House minority leader, voiced confidence in Mr. Mineta when he was in town Oct. 29 to speak to the Silicon Valley Manufacturing Group.

"I have tremendous confidence in him and believe he's going to help lead us to fixing the problem once and for all," he said.

Mr. Mineta upset some Democrats when he accepted the post of transportation secretary in the Bush cabinet. But most saw him as a potential ally in the Republican administration. He called the Democratic congressional leadership before taking the post, says U.S. Rep. Mike Honda, who now holds the seat in Congress that Mr. Mineta once filled, and also got a call.

"I told him he would be able to raise important issues that might not otherwise get aired," Mr. Honda says.

Mr. Mineta, a Democrat who represented a Republican-leaning district in Congress, also walked the line between regulators and the airline industry when he served on the House Transportation Committee, as a member and later as chairman. Earning the respect of the airlines over the years makes it easier for him to push them to increase expensive safety measures.

"If you had a person in that position who was remarkably partisan or not supported by the airline industry, they would have a much more difficult time imposing the rigorous and fiscally difficult and complicated procedures now being mandated," says Rod Diridon, executive director of the Mineta Transportation Institute at San Jose State University, named for the former congressman.

Mr. Mineta's life story is one of those that inspire others. As a Japanese-American, he was interned during World War

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II, but went on to serve in Congress and lead the effort to compensate Japanese-Americans imprisoned during the war. The San Jose City Council has just named the airport for him.

Mr. Mineta was born in San Jose. A UC Berkeley grad, he worked in his father's insurance business, served in the Army from 1953 to 1956 and was elected to the San Jose City Council in 1967. He was mayor of the city from 1971 to 1974, when he was part of the reform class of Democrats who swept into the capital after the Watergate scandal.

The Democratic sweep helped Mr. Mineta overcome the Republican leanings of the district. Even a lifelong Republican such as Gordon Abbott, who now serves on the county Republican Central Committee, served on Mr. Mineta's campaign finance committee.

County Assessor Larry Stone, a Democrat, says, "A lot of diehard Republicans sat on the fence when Norman was running. It was the best they could do for [him]."

Mr. Mineta received much of his education about airlines while serving on the Public Works and Transportation Committee, which he chaired from 1993 until Republicans took control of the House after the 1994 elections. On his frequent flights between Washington and San Jose, he would often visit the cockpit and talk with the crew. He also met his second wife, Danelia, who was a flight attendant, on a flight. The interest in flight is intergenerational. One of Mr. Mineta's two sons is an airline pilot.

He also served on the first Select Committee on Intelligence, formed to take a closer look at the CIA after reported abuses in the 1970s. In that role he got the attention of John McMahon, who headed the CIA's operations. Mr. McMahon recalls Mr. Mineta's relentless grilling, a method he learned to appreciate.

"If you get Congress in at the take-off, they'll be there at the landing," he says.

Mr. McMahon retired from the CIA in 1986, and went to work for Lockheed Corp. (now Lockheed Martin Corp.) as president and CEO. When he heard that Mr. Mineta was considering leaving Congress after the Republican sweep in the 1994 elections, he got Lockheed to offer him a lucrative private-sector job at the company's headquarters in Bethesda, Md.

"When I heard that Norm was considering retiring, I was eager to get him to work for Lockheed," Mr. McMahon says.

Mr. Mineta worked at Lockheed Martin headquarters from 1995 until President Bill Clinton appointed him commerce secretary in 2000.

In his current role, Mr. Mineta is also earning a reputation for candor. Mr. Honda says that after the terrorist attacks, members of Congress often came away from briefings from law enforcement and intelligence services dissatisfied.

"We got more information from CNN," he says.

But when Mr. Mineta appeared in the chamber for a closed-door briefing, members of Congress got all of their questions answered, Mr. Honda says.

At the end, he says, they applauded him.

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